

The Incorporation of Animal-Assisted Interventions in Social Work Education

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ABSTRACT. Successful social work practice requires orientation to diverse social and cultural characteristics which structure the framework for our communities and families. This paper explores the necessity of incorporating the connection between people and non-human relationships in our understanding of social support systems. Specifically, we examine our relationships with animals in the understanding of these social networks and in turn, the readiness of social work education to support this valuable and prominent feature of the modern family system. In addition, this paper will highlight the congruence between the study of the human-animal bond and the social work curriculum. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Today more than ever, effective social work practice requires orientation to diverse and unique qualities in the social and cultural makeup of our communities and families. When we have studied the underlying concept of social systems historically, our explorations were often limited to how people are linked or attached. It seems the most important quality of social support systems is that they establish and convey a useful interdependence and respect. The quality of these relationships provides a sense of feeling valued, looked after, loved, even facilitating safety and attachment. Primary social connections are most often a description of the relationships in our lives that are most critical.

This paper explores the importance of incorporating the significant ties between people and nonhuman relationships in our understanding of social support systems. Specifically, we must critically examine our relationships with companion animals in the understanding of these social networks, and in turn, the readiness of social work education to support this valuable and prominent feature of the modern family system. In addition, this paper highlights the congruence between the study of the human-animal bond and social work education.

The relationship between people and animals holds a unique meaning to the field of social work. Social work education, as in many professions, evolved out of the needs and pioneering efforts of practitioners and retains its meaning by staying close to the practice community. Social work education is often challenged by the difficulty of keeping pace with the changing demands of practice skills and settings. Because they are two aspects of a whole, the validity of education and practice are reduced when they are not in reference to one another. Decisions regarding the development of social work education should therefore make every effort to take into consideration, and even make central, the current developments in the field of practice.

ANIMAL-ASSISTED SOCIAL WORK

Social work's core understanding of systems and defining focus on person-in-environment are two of the central concepts shaping social work curriculum and practice. Our relationship with animals is an enduring feature in so many families, homes, and communities. For centuries, the importance of animals in people's lives has been recognized (Bustad, 1996). It is estimated that there are over 2,500 animal-assisted programs in the United States (Benda & Lightmark, 2004). Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is defined as a goal-directed intervention in which an animal

that meets specific training and safety criteria is incorporated as an integral part of the clinical healthcare treatment process (“About animal-assisted activities,” n.d.). AAT is delivered or directed by a professional health or human service provider who demonstrates skill and expertise regarding the clinical applications of human-animal interactions.

***Animal-Assisted Social Work (AASW)
and the Mission of Social Work Education***

The strong emergence of animal-assisted interventions is based primarily on the reliable beneficial effect that animals have on human health, well-being, and motivation. These notable effects can be demonstrated across age, race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and life condition. Images of animals appear in literature of all kinds art, celebrations, dreams, fables, folklore, language, medicine, music, religion, work, and recreation. Animals themselves can be found in nearly every aspect of life. Social work educators have a responsibility to consider the applicability of this topic to support the academic mission of social work education programs.

The Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW) at the University of Denver has offered a course, entitled *Integration of Animals into Therapeutic Settings* for the last six years, and now also offers a second advanced course, entitled *Animal-Assisted Social Work Practice*. Originally suggested by a group of GSSW students, the courses offer concentration-year students the opportunity to explore the therapeutic use of human-animal interactions. The courses expose students to practice guidelines for animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted therapy (AAT), integrating national standards of care, proper safety, and ethical guidelines for animals and clients, experiential and alternative therapy theory, and knowledge and skills into students’ core clinical training. The mission of the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work is to foster social responsibility and enhance the quality of life, based on equality for all people, through excellence in teaching, scholarship, and leadership. The philosophy and core values of GSSW, which guide the developing curriculum and planning programs, include progressive ideals of social and economic justice, cultural diversity, and freedom (“Our mission,” n.d.).

GSSW’s guiding principles enable graduates to analyze social problem dynamics in individuals, families, organizations, communities, and social policy. AASW lends itself to interdisciplinary coordination in each of these areas and can be introduced into a number of therapeutic

settings (with individuals, groups and families) in diverse communities. Often populations receiving social work services are those who have minimal positive experiences in their lives. Put as simply as possible, when introduced properly into a therapeutic setting, animals make people feel good, improve quality of life and assist in healing. For individuals with a troubled history of human interactions, an AAT animal can serve as a nonthreatening partner in the treatment and support process, creating an initial trust connection that later may be transferred to the professional. The quiet, calm presence of an animal in a therapeutic situation with those who have experienced trauma can remediate some of the episodes' effects, enabling the individual to benefit more from the intervention. In addition, an animal's loyalty and authentic nonjudgmental willingness makes our relationships with them some of the most enduring and safe interactions possible. AASW is a powerful therapeutic approach that can have multiple impacts, aiding in physical, social and emotional healing through a dynamic of relationship and connection with others.

For people who are in difficult life situations, pets can be of special benefit. Studies investigating the measurable physical effects of human-animal interaction have determined that they are effective in reducing blood pressure (Katcher, 1981; Serpell, 1990; Anderson, Reid & Jennings, 1992) and promoting survival in coronary artery illness (Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch & Thomas, 1980; Jennings, 1997). Animals can often reach people when human relationships may be difficult. When utilized in an adjunct capacity, animal-assisted therapy has been found to foster socialization, increase responsiveness, facilitate mental alertness, and enhance an outward focus on the environment (Fritz, Thomas, Kass & Hart, 1995; Holcomb & Meacham, 1998).

Modern culture has rekindled acceptance of animals as important contributors to our lives, supported by an encouraging array of multidisciplinary endorsements for the therapeutic efficacy of animals in human health, which now suggests legitimacy for the inclusion of animals in therapeutic settings. The potential contribution of animals in human health and well-being may help avoid an over-dependency on western culture and promote valuable cross-cultural diversity (Serpell, 1994). Utilizing animal-assisted therapy allows socialworkers to interact with people experientially, rather than relying strictly on verbal understanding of families, individuals, and groups that may be lost, literally, in translation.

ANIMAL-ASSISTED SOCIAL WORK IN CLINICAL PRACTICE CONCENTRATIONS

The University of Denver organizes its graduate academic curriculum to meet accreditation standards and focus on important core educational areas. GSSW has identified five tracks, or specialty areas, from which students choose their primary focus: High-Risk Youth, Child Welfare, Families, Adults, and Community Practice. For the purpose of this paper, each area will be examined to highlight the application of AASW to each concentration.

Within the client-social worker relationship across cultural, gender, and lifespan considerations, animals can enhance and expedite rapport-building and trust. It has been shown that the presence of animals stimulates communication and topics of conversation between individuals who otherwise may be socially marginalized, isolated or disenfranchised (Lynch, n.d.). In examination of the psychosocial benefits of animal companionship, findings support the conclusion that assimilating animals into therapy can address cognitive and perceptual deficits (Nathanson & de Faria, 1993) and assist clients to self-regulate (Holcomb & Meacham, 1998), develop empathy for animals and humans (Ascione, 1992; Ascione & Weber, 1996), provide inspiration and motivation (Fine, 2000), socialize (McNicholas & Collis, 2000), help maintain focus and attention (Katcher & Wilkins, 1994), reduce aggressive behaviors (Nebbe, n.d.), increase self-esteem (Triebenbacher, 1998), and aid in stress reduction (Allen & Blascovich, 1996; Batson, McCabe & Baun, 1998; Hansen, Messinger, Baun & Megel, 1999; Nagengast, Baun, Megel & Leibowitz, 1997). Caring for an animal can reduce neediness and learned helplessness and encourage optimism, a sense of mastery and control in life. AASW is an empowerment-based approach applicable across multiple settings and populations (Endenburg & Baarda, 1995; Hart, 2000; Triebenbacher, 2000).

AASW and the Families Track

The Families Track at GSSW prepares students to empower and strengthen families from a systems perspective, offering students a broad definition of “family.” Families are described as groups including biological lineage, affiliated families, and communities. The Families Track description states, “Social workers utilizing this perspective may intervene with individuals, couples, several members of a family, peer groups, work associates, school classrooms and organizations”

(“Families track,” n.d.). Students are expected to work in a variety of settings with adults, adolescents, and children.

As part of most organized communities, animals share our lives, and are firmly imbedded in the makeup of our families. In the United States, there are an estimated 60 million dogs, 59 million cats, 13 million caged birds, four million horses, more than seven million reptiles and amphibians, 12 million small animals such as hamsters and guinea pigs, and 12 million fish tanks. Despite the question of suitability, many people also take wild animals as pets. There is evidence that animals are usually seen as family members (Bulcroft, 1990; Cain, 1985). Over half of all families in the United States own at least one pet, and four in ten children are born into a family that includes non-human family members (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). Social workers find that asking about animals when exploring family histories offers a captivating and safer opening into difficult, defended dialogue, serving as the aforementioned “social lubricant.” Studies of young children have suggested that they view companion animals as friends, even as siblings and certainly as important family members. In one study, up to 57% of dreams of four-year-old boys involve animals (Melson, 1995). The presence of pets increases feelings of happiness, security, and self-worth, reducing loneliness and isolation on a daily basis or during separations or transitions such as spousal bereavement.

The relevance of animals in family systems may be most powerfully portrayed by examining the darker side in animal welfare considerations. Dr. Frank Ascione (2000) quotes Ann Quinlist, Executive Director of The Domestic Violence Intervention Project in Wisconsin, describing the difficult challenge one of her clients faced in leaving her animals exposed to violence. The woman had received heartbreaking pictures from her abusive husband showing his mutilation of the dog she had left behind. The woman immediately returned to her spouse and was not heard of again. In fact, 18% to 40% of women seeking shelter at a crisis center reported concerns for their pets’ safety, and indicated that their pets’ welfare prevented them from seeking shelter sooner (Ascione, 2000). National efforts are underway to create shelters and recruit animal welfare professionals to collaborate in housing pets of women who are battered, and to cross-train as mandatory reporters of suspected child maltreatment. Dr. Ascione has identified 113 domestic violence and animal welfare agencies developing integrated approaches to helping women with animals leave abusive situations (Ascione, 2000). Animals are part of our daily lives, can be found in almost all our organized communities, and are firmly imbedded in the hearts of our families.

AASW and the High-Risk Youth Track

There are over 40 million youth between the ages of 10 to 18 in the United States (“Annual estimates,” n.d.). This represents 14% of the population. While the health status of adolescents differs according to age, gender, race, and ethnic origin, there is ample documentation suggesting that many adolescents, regardless of background, engage in high-risk behavior (Benson, 1993; Lingren, 1997; Centers for Disease Control, 1994). High-Risk Youth, as defined by GSSW, are young people between the ages of 10 and 18 who may experience difficulties with drug and alcohol abuse, anti-social functioning, violence or school problems (“High-risk youth track,” n.d.). Strength-based approaches and development of resiliency and protective factors, often achieved with AASW, appear to be effective frameworks for intervention with high-risk youth. Many of the field placements in this clinical track are exploring or have already established AAT programs.

AASW can be used to enhance protective factors and build resilience against the risk factors many young people face. Our earliest protective factors appear to be found in attachment and the development of affectional bonds (Bowlby, 1980). Attachment theory and Bowlby’s ethological framework define the role of attachment in child development. Once formed, attachment appears to become a permanent strength in other settings and relationships. Failure to achieve early attachment has been assumed to contribute to multiple concerns. Bowlby uses the concept of the “working model” to define the psychological worldview that is, in turn, used to integrate experiences, appraise situations, and determine choices and actions. Animals, and specifically pets, can provide opportunities for attachment and nurturing of others, and more broadly, offer extended social networks and social interaction. They can uniquely fill a combination of emotional needs, sometimes substituting for an absence of human attachment and at other times expanding the range of relationships and social contacts through companionship in difficult times. This may offer a young person the supportive rationale to reexamine his/her personal “working model.” Evidence that pets serve an important role in the experience of family and feeling attached or cared for is outlined by Haight, Michel and Hendrix (2000). During a telephone interview with 612 individuals, a factor analysis of 12 items related to loving relationships among humans revealed nine significant items which were identified as pet attachment, including feeling closer to the animal than to other members of the family, and feeling loved and never rejected by their pet, and therefore less lonely.

In a Los Angeles study, relationships with animals during adolescence appear to have a motivating effect; enhanced self-esteem was reported in adolescent pet owners vs. non-owners (Siegel, 1995). Another significant protective factor for high-risk youth is the acquisition of skills that promote a sense of self-efficacy (Rutter, 1987). Having animals in the school system seems to improve overall attendance, as well as providing inspiration and motivation for students to engage in activities in which they may not have otherwise participated (Delta Society, 1999; Hart, 2000). Adolescents with frequent opportunities for achievement, employment, growth, and education are less likely than those without such opportunities to reject prosocial values because of their frustration and anger (Fraser, 1997).

Research into the use of AAT indicates a socializing effect, stimulating engagement, and conversation between children who may feel socially isolated or disenfranchised (Salomon, 1995; Redefers & Goodman, 1989; Mallon, 1994). AASW has been shown to assist clients in regulating behavior in order to interact effectively with the animal (and subsequently, other people) as well as develop empathy for animals and humans alike (Ascione & Weber, 1996; Endenburg & Baarda, 1995; Granger & Kogan, 2000).

AASW and the Adult Track

Research is just beginning to support what most pet owners already understand: having animals in our lives enhances and enriches quality of life. GSSW's Adult Track prepares students to work with adult clients experiencing mental health or substance abuse disabilities, and/or those with health- and aging-related problems. The required coursework focuses students on the areas of assessment of mental health, intervention approaches, and community mental health. The elective coursework offers students a broad view of therapeutic approaches including strength- and empowerment-based models for serving adult clients. AASW coursework will clearly support a strength-based orientation.

AASW can be used as a therapeutic modality to facilitate the healing and rehabilitation of adults with acute and permanent mental illness and chronic diseases, and of those dealing with difficult transitions. The inclusion of AAT in social work practice offers unique opportunities to enhance motivation for clients to participate in building relationships and reintegrating into the community. The mutual learning between clients and pets can contribute to a client's sense of self-efficacy, self-control, and mastery as well as enhance qualities of patience, kindness,

and empathy toward the animal and others. Animals offer attentiveness, expressiveness, and welcoming behavior (Siegel, 1993) in contrast to the often judgmental and punitive attitudes that many adults, with whom social workers interact, may ordinarily encounter.

The literature is beginning to offer convincing evidence of the importance of the human-animal bond and its positive effects in working with the elderly in both acute and long-term care settings. In recognition of the importance of animals in the lives of older persons, there is now federal housing legislation to support an elderly person's right to keep a pet. The benefits reach beyond socialization; medical insurance costs are reduced as companionship is sought from the pet rather than from a physician. For example, Hoffman (1995) found a 40-60% reduction in demand for physicians' services for medically non-serious problems, as well as an improved outcome for management of depression among Medicare enrollees who owned pets. Animals play an important role as surrogate family members and companions, and can be found in many of today's acute care, long-term care and hospice environments.

Several studies have documented the benefits of inclusion of animals in eldercare and hospice settings. One such study examined the role of AAT in reducing loneliness in the elderly in long-term institutional settings. Of the 62 residents, 45 met the inclusion criteria for the study. They were administered the Demographic and Pet History questionnaire and Version 3 of the UCLA Loneliness Scale. They were divided into three groups of fifteen. The first group received no AAT, the second received AAT once per week, while the third received AAT three times each week. Participants were retested after the study, when statistically significant reductions of loneliness were found in both AAT groups (Banks & Banks, 2002).

Another study examined 33 participants in two separate long-term care facilities, focusing on AAT as compared to other non-animal therapy activities. The outcome of the study concluded that residents involved in the AAT activities were three times more likely to initiate and have longer conversations than those involved in the traditional activities. The most important finding appeared to be the frequency of touch. Since touch is a considerable part of human socialization and the elderly are often deprived of physical affection, touching the animals during the visits increased the residents' positive social behavior and improved quality of life (Friedmann, 1995).

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) held a workshop to examine the health benefits of human/animal interactions. The study examined the relationship between companion animals, people, and health, and

explored the scientific descriptions of these relationships. The NIH concluded there was “persuasive evidence . . . that pets are likely to be medically beneficial to some people’s health” (“The health benefits of pets,” 1987, September 10-11). The study also underlined the importance of systematically studying the role of animals in human health through interdisciplinary collaborative research.

AASW and the Child Welfare Track

The Child Welfare track seeks to prepare social workers to work with youth and families experiencing a wide range of problems including child abuse and maltreatment, poverty, family conflict, domestic violence, and mental health concerns. Animal-assisted social work offers a useful adjunct to engage clients who may be suspicious and resistant to assistance from public welfare agencies and personnel. AASW can be integrated into most of the clinical intervention models endorsed by the Child Welfare Track. GSSW has numerous field sites designated in the Child Welfare Track that either are already utilizing animals or would like to develop this type of programming.

Research indicates that the participation of animals has a socializing effect, stimulating engagement and conversation among children who may feel socially isolated or disenfranchised (Endenburg & Baarda, 1995; Hart, 2000; Triebenbacher, 2000).

The modern concept of the use of AAT with children is often credited to Dr. Boris Levinson, Professor of Psychology at Yeshiva University following WWII. Levinson found that animals could be useful in the psychological assessment of children. The interaction between the child and the animal provided significant clinical information. Levinson also found that animals give the child more opportunity to feel control in the situation during therapy, which is important for building ego strength and self-esteem. The child finds motivation and then success in communicating with the animal, and in turn, feels empowered (Levinson, 1972). Child welfare workers will find AASW can enhance their efforts to build relationship with youth.

Pre-school children easily learn from their interactions and connection with animals, developing important skills through the sense of touch, especially of something soft, warm, and friendly (Levinson, 1972). Several studies have found statistically significant links between the strength of pre-school children’s companion animal bond and their empathy for other children (Poresky, 1996). Consistently, studies are finding improved cognitive development in children who have pets

(Poresky, 1987). By five years of age, the family can have shaped the child's attitude and behavior toward animals, both positively and negatively, as in cruelty behavior.

Fourth grade children who participated in a school-based humane education research study focusing on human-animal relationships, companion animals, wild animals, and farm animals, showed increased empathy with humans. This study included pre- and post-tests and follow-up one year later (Ascione & Weber 1996). During pre-adolescent and early adolescent years, animals may serve as surrogate parents, especially for latchkey children. The pet always has time to spend with the child, when the parent may be away or unavailable; it does not go out for the evening, and more importantly, never files for divorce, places you for adoption, or spends the family budget on drugs.

Child welfare work requires that social workers be prepared to support children who have been sexually, physically, and emotionally abused. There are many potential effects from child abuse and neglect, and frequently intervention focuses on the following areas.

Damaged self-esteem. Animal-assisted therapy has been found to be an extremely valuable adjunctive therapy for maltreated children whose self-perception may be full of doubt, self-hate, guilt, and confusion (Reichert, 1998). In these cases, animals have been found to serve as motivators and catalysts for growth and change; improved self-esteem has been frequently reported in children working with and caring for animals.

Difficulty or inability to develop trusting relationships. Child abuse and neglect have been implicated in causing disruption in many aspects of child development. Some children manifest attachment difficulties that make it challenging for them to trust others, which in turn, is especially detrimental to the child's socialization skills. AASW can play an extremely important role in helping a social worker establish a therapeutic connection with such a child. Utilizing animals can serve, "as the bridge to decrease the initial shock incidental to encountering a therapist or beginning a new group therapeutic experience" (Mallon, 1992, p. 54).

Feeling out of control, powerless or unaccepted. AASW provides an opportunity for maltreated children to gain more control and feel unconditionally accepted by a living being. Interacting with, nurturing, and caring for an animal can, in turn, allow a child the opportunity to experience a reciprocal relationship where love, affection and touch are expressed with healthy boundaries and in a nonthreatening way. This can inspire children to revisit their "internal working model" and reestablish empathic regard for others and relationship skills.

Socialization and skill acquisition. The socializing aspect of the integration of animals with children contributes to their ability to participate in school and nonschool social activities, as well as furthering community involvement. Within the learning environment for children with emotional disturbance and mental illness, animals are capable of obtaining and holding a high level of attention from those who may otherwise be struggling with focusing (e.g., children with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Oppositional and Conduct Disorders). As the children's attention is focused, aggressive behaviors diminish, thereby creating a more successful learning environment (Hart, 2000). Success has also been shown with autistic children in increasing self-esteem, socialization, and development of language skills (Granger & Kogan, 2000).

Service animals have been shown to have a normalizing effect for school children confined to wheelchairs, who were approached more readily and frequently by other children eliciting conversation about the service animal (Hart, 2000; Poresky, 1996). These animals serve as social facilitators, alleviating the anxiety of able-bodied children with regard to their classmates with handicapping conditions.

AASW and the Community Practice Track

Community social work practice seeks to meet people's needs through social change at the community, organizational, societal, and global levels. The principal skill of community practice is leadership, and community practitioners must strive for an effective leadership style. Community practice includes community social work (planning and organizing), organizational social work (administration, program development, organization development), societal social work (politics, social movements, social policy development), and international social work (social development, nongovernmental organization development).

A central AASW consideration in the Community Practice Track focuses on the area of humane education and the importance of examining our attitudes toward not just other cultures but other species, specifically domesticated companion animals. Humane animal training and disciplinary approaches in AASW parallel social work efforts to educate parents about positive approaches to parenting. Children and adolescents seen in mental health clinics display rates of exposure to animal cruelty as high as 10%-25%. Are these learned behaviors visible in their communities or families?

The DSM-IV has included animal cruelty as a criterion often found in Conduct Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). A replicated study by Frank Ascione found that more than half of women seeking safety in shelters reported that their pets had been injured or killed by their partners. In 60% of those cases, the children in those homes had witnessed the animal abuse (Ascione & Arkow, 1999). Organizations such as the American Humane Association and other local agencies have begun providing outreach and partnerships to create community educational coalitions that discuss the correlations between animal welfare legislation, animal abuse, child maltreatment, and domestic violence. These correlations are often described as Link Violence, because of the connection between animals and vulnerable people as targets of violence in the same home (American Humane Association, 2003). In a study by the New Jersey Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 60% of families with founded child neglect charges were also abusing their animals. In physically abusing families, the rate of animal cruelty co-occurrence was 88%. In 83% of animal abuse cases, the families were already known to social services (Lockwood & Ascione, 1998).

Another important defining feature of successful AASW is the multidisciplinary nature of these approaches. However, especially in the area of AASW where global standards have only now begun to emerge, there remains a lack of general acceptance of these ideas. Students in the Community Practice Track will find as part of the coursework discussion focusing on the many challenges of building consensus, planning, implementing, and evaluating an AASW program.

DEVELOPING AN AASW CURRICULUM

To establish an AASW program, one must begin by approaching the facility's administration with a well-organized plan. This plan should include: clearly written policies and procedures; staff education about the proposed program; steps to recruit and train volunteers; methods for screening potential participants; techniques for testing and training potential therapy animals; a plan for the development of appropriate field placements and supervision; and a process for the program's implementation and evaluation. Students will need to develop skills enabling them to collaborate across many different levels of organizational design, and learn to bring a diverse set of interests together. For example, an AAT program in a hospital setting may require integration and collaboration among an animal handler, patient, mental health counselor,

medical staff, occupational and physical therapists, doctors, nurses, aids, housekeeping and custodial staff, administrators, risk management personnel, veterinarians, and so forth. Implementing a new AAT program takes a significant amount of time and effort to achieve systemic integration and actual collaboration among all participants. An example in Colorado was outlined by Arkow (2000):

One of the oldest and most extensive programs is the Prescription Pet Program found at The Children's Hospital in Denver, Colorado. Animal visits are incorporated into a wide range of treatment milieu including Ontology, The Special Care Nursery, Dialysis Unit, In and Outpatient Psychology, Medical Day Treatment, and Medical Specialties. Two veterinarians evaluate dogs semi-annually both medically and behaviorally, one from the hospital's advisory board and the dogs' personal doctor. The hospital's lab conducts tests on throat cultures and fecal samples to test for Salmonella and Campylobacter pathogens and for parasites. Program guidelines were achieved through a unique collaboration between the hospital's Association of Volunteers and the Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society. (p. 446)

ANIMAL WELFARE AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In developing a program that supports human-animal interactions and stresses the importance of the bond between people and animals, it becomes a paramount concern that we also explore the broader ethical considerations involved in the participation of another living animal to achieve these objectives.

In much of the literature, we find an absence of clear references to the question of the correctness of including animals as therapeutic partners. Some organizations believe the participation of animals in therapeutic settings may be setting up animals to be mistreated. Certainly the inclusion of an animal as a mere tool to achieve a treatment objective without concern for the welfare or rights of that animal would negate each animal's intrinsic value and is unacceptable.

Ethicist Jerrod Tannenbaum (1989) described the elements of ethical concerns for working with animals in therapeutic settings. He questioned the possibility that a one-sided bond may be created as a feature of human quality of life considerations being weighted in the development of AAT/AAA programs. Tannenbaum raises an important point;

social workers who consider including animals as therapeutic adjuncts must recognize the unique contribution that another living creature makes to the clinical dynamic, watching out for the needs of the animal as a partner in the treatment process.

Also accepted is the fact that animals' usefulness to people often serves as a means to improve animal care, training, and treatment. Domesticated animals generally seek contact with well-meaning humans. Many animals also appreciate the rewards of interacting with humans in structured ways. Obedience-trained dogs appear to be happier and more content than untrained dogs, which is largely credited to the relationship that develops between the handler and animal and can therefore be tapped to most effectively work with clients. However, we must be cautious about the myth of homogeneity. Animals, as with people, come in all different sizes, breeds, and species with distinct personalities, temperaments, and genetic orientations. This makes for a truly wonderful and complex diversity in animals, and also may define each animal's true calling and limitations.

An AASW program would need to require that students fully explore these ethical considerations and attempt to remediate any of the risks or contraindications for including animals in a therapeutic setting. Additionally, students should be asked to define and support nationally endorsed standards of care for animal-assisted interventions.

The animal participants in AASW programs must also benefit from the activity, and at no time should animals' presence in therapeutic settings compromise humane treatment of or diminish respect for the animal. The AASW certificate program ensures that students completing the program become advocates for the animals, making certain they achieve a "two-sided bond."

CONCLUSION

Mounting evidence compels both social work practitioners and social work educators to fully explore the important role of the human-animal bond, and the therapeutic inclusion of animals as teachers, therapists, and friends, in fostering social responsibility and improving quality of life for all people. Whether training for work with families, high-risk youth, adults, the child welfare system, or communities and organizations, social work students (and subsequently, the people they serve) benefit from adding animal-assisted therapy to students' repertoire of professional intervention techniques.

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